



Mentor, Sponsor, Coach: Navigating Career Relationships

Career Development



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There are several advisory relationships within an organization that can challenge you and help you to grow professionally and personally — including mentor, sponsor, and coach.

This article will provide an overview on how to find these opportunities and help you to be open to these pivotal figures in your life. It will also discuss ways that you can become a mentor, sponsor, or coach to others.

Mentor

A mentor is someone inside or outside of your organization who counsels or guides you in your career. Sometimes these relationships can extend beyond your career, and mentors can become valued counselors in your life as well.

You can have many mentors from all walks of life, whether they're from your career field, university, or from an entirely different area, such as a religious figure. Given that mentors can advise you in any number of ways, it's best to have several mentors, because they may offer perspectives you lack or haven't considered.

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For example, I have mentors who are attorneys and business colleagues, family, and friends. Each provides valued guidance and counsel. Some of my favorite mentors are those who offer other

avenues of thought about my particular circumstances that I had not considered.

At one point in my career, I had an intimidating meeting that I was dreading. I spoke with a valued mentor about my concerns beforehand, and she recommended that I allow those who called the meeting to lead it.

That advice served me well in that meeting because I initially made several assumptions that were not necessarily true. In fact, the meeting was not as intimidating as I built it up to be in my mind. Had I spoken first, I may have made the meeting much more complicated than it had to be.

It seems like an obvious answer, but I was so wrapped up in what was going to happen that I forgot this option. Since then, I've used this advice countless times, and it has prevented me from making incorrect assumptions that would have complicated work, relationships, and life.

I have since taken the advice I've learned from my mentors and passed it along to mentees. Finding opportunities to mentor is a bit easier than finding opportunities to sponsor or coach. Look for ways to offer your best advice to those around you who ask for guidance and who seem open to it.

Actively listen to their stories, concerns, and goals. Respond accordingly and you'll find yourself in a mentorship role.

Sponsor

More engaged than a mentor, a sponsor actively takes steps to propel your career forward. For example, an executive who appreciates your work and advocates for you to collaborate on a big project with visibility to senior management would be a sponsor.

As with mentors, you can have more than one sponsor. However, they may be tougher to find because they take such an active role in your career — even putting their own reputation on the line for you.

Within time, a person in a powerful position in your company may take notice and jump into a sponsorship role. They may do so because they're good people, or they may see you as necessary to your company's success and they want you to stay with the company. They may want you to take on more responsibility. Whatever the motivation, sponsors are invaluable because they actively improve your career prospects.

Working hard and cultivating relationships are essential to find a sponsor.

There are many executives in my company who gave me opportunities to work on important projects, or managers who made it clear to my boss that I add value to our organization. They are my sponsors, and I greatly appreciate their faith in me.

Of course, it is important to do your best work to prove your sponsors right and encourage continued sponsorship in the future.

Finding opportunities to be a sponsor may be a bit more challenging than finding opportunities to mentor because you must wield some measure of influence in your company. Furthermore, you have to be willing to put your own reputation on the line for the person you're sponsoring.

If individuals are worthy of sponsorship, give them an opportunity to work on a big project (e.g., “Joan would be a great addition to this project because she is so organized and detail-oriented!”) or mention to senior management why they’re great employees (e.g., “Jake saves me so much time by red-lining much of the contract before it even comes to me!”).

You may not always get credit for being a sponsor and that’s okay. For example, I’ve sponsored some colleagues by helping their managers justify those colleagues’ roles and they never knew. Do what is best for your company, as well as what makes you comfortable.

Coach

Merriam-Webster defines a coach as, “one who instructs or trains.” Coaching is more of an active and ongoing relationship than mentorship and sponsorship. Coaching requires consistent feedback and constructive criticism. Bosses are perfect coaches because they understand your work and can help you grow in your job.

However, a coach does not have to be your boss. A coach can be anyone with whom you are comfortable training you to excel at your job. Ideally, coaches don’t simply tell you what to do, but guide you so that you come to your own conclusion about what to do.

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Coaching is trickier because, by its very nature, it has to be a more ongoing process and relationship. Both parties have to be willing to dedicate a decent amount of continual time to the coaching relationship.

If you have opportunities to coach, it is usually best accomplished by asking more questions than providing advice. For example, if someone you’re coaching comes to you with a challenge, perhaps you can ask, “What outcome do you want and what avenue(s) do you think will best get you there?” versus “You should do this.”

By asking questions while coaching, you can best determine what the person you’re coaching wants. Additionally, brainstorming could be a positive activity when coaching because it is an open-minded process and could give the person you’re coaching new ideas or approaches.

I struggle with coaching. It is often easier to just tell people what you think they should do than to lead them to their own conclusions about what is best for them. Coaching also takes time and patience. I am constantly working on my coaching skills to become a better coach and, thus, a better leader.

This leads me to a final point about coaching that also applies to mentoring and sponsoring: This is a never-ending process. You should always be learning better ways to mentor, sponsor, and coach.

Throughout your career, you will be a mentor and mentee; you’ll be a sponsor and be sponsored; you’ll coach and be coached. To live your best life, always seek ways to learn and teach.

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